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### S/elective belonging

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## SPECIAL ISSUE PAPER

# S/elective belonging: how rural newcomer families with children become stayers

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## Abstract

Rural stayers are often defined as people who have never left their rural home region or village. However, rural regions and villages also receive new inhabitants. This paper explores if and how newcomers become inhabitants who stay put. We do so by interviewing couples of newcomers who moved to a rural area of the Netherlands at the family formation life stage. All had moved between 5 and 10 years prior to this study. We view the process of becoming a stayer through the lens of getting attached to and identifying with the new home region. We adopt the concepts of 'elective belonging' and 'selective belonging' to explore the newcomers' actual experiences of rural place and, in turn, the ways rural newcomer families become stayers. We identify two types of stayers: children-led and convinced stayers. Both envisage a re-negotiation of staying or leaving at a later life stage (either the empty nest or old age stage). They all *elected to belong* to residential places in enchanted rural landscapes. But they also are *selective* in developing belonging to the rural. First, especially convinced stayers consciously adapt their behaviour in order to fit in the local community. Second, children-led stayers seek only to become involved in child-related activities. Third, both types of stayers 'identify against' certain elements of local culture and of real rural stayers. *S/elective* strategies of belonging are found to go hand-in-hand with processes of becoming a stayer. Moreover, *s/elective belonging* to the place leaves the option to 'leave in future'.

## KEYWORDS

Elective belonging, selective belonging, immobility, life course, the Netherlands

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Rural stayers are often defined as people who have never left their home region or home village. From the limited research into what motivates stayers to stay we know that attachment to and rootedness in the rural home area play a significant role (Barcus & Brunn, 2009; Haukanes, 2013). The presence of social networks of family and friends, and familiarity with both the rural community and the physical landscape contribute to the process of staying. However, rural regions and villages also receive new inhabitants. Although it is increasingly acknowledged that rural in-migration is more 'messy' and diverse than previously thought (Bijker & Haartsen, 2012; Bijker, Haartsen, & Strijker, 2012, 2013; Stockdale, 2015), the predominant idea is that rural newcomers are middle class people attracted by positive representations of the rural living environment, the so-called rural idyll

(Benson & O'Reilly, 2009; Halfacree, 1994). In their conceptual paper 'Moving to the countryside ... and staying: lives beyond representations', Halfacree and Rivera (2012) note that there is often a mismatch between these rural representations and rural reality, which amplifies the question, why do newcomers stay? They call for more empirical research into 'why and how pro-rural migrants subsequently stay in their [rural] destinations' (Halfacree & Rivera, 2012: 92). In this paper, we respond to this call. We do so by focusing on the experiences of rural place by newcomers who moved to a rural area of the Netherlands at the family formation life stage. All had moved between 5 and 10 years prior to this study being conducted.

In contrast to Halfacree & Rivera's view that a migrant becomes a stayer because of a 'number of overlapping ways by which out-migration may not occur' (2012: 100), we view the process by which newcomers become stayers through the lenses of place attachment and

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home making. The mobilities turn literature suggests that mobility (the freedom to move) increasingly undermines notions of place, neighbourhood and boundedness (Bauman, 1998; Shucksmith, 2012; Urry, 2010). Nevertheless, with greater mobility, groups such as our middle class newcomers seek out residential places in enchanted landscapes: in other words, they elect to belong to particular locations. In this paper, we adopt the concepts of 'elective belonging' (Savage, 2010; Savage, Bagnall, & Longhurst, 2005) and 'selective belonging' (Watt, 2009) in order to explore the ways rural newcomer families become stayers. Based on the newcomers' experiences we examine perceived positive and negative aspects of rural life, and how these experiences interrelate with the practice of staying. In line with place attachment theories, we further distinguish between attachment to the physical and to the social rural environment (Hidalgo & Hernández, 2001; Lewicka, 2011).

The paper is structured as follows. We start by theorising the concepts of place attachment and s/elective belonging, followed by an explanation of our research methods. Our results are then organised as follows. First, we explore whether or not our newcomer families perceive that they have become rural stayers. Then we explore how our respondents experience and participate in country living, and if and how they, deliberately or not, have developed s/elective senses of belonging, to either the physical or the social rural living environment. We round off with some concluding remarks.

## 2 | PLACE ATTACHMENT AND SELECTIVE BELONGING

In the process of becoming a stayer, developing place attachment and a sense of belonging play a key role. Gustafson (2006: 19) defines place attachment as 'bonds between people and place based on affection (emotion, feeling), cognition (thought, knowledge, belief) and practice (action, behaviour)'. When bonds between people and place become stronger, people develop senses of belonging to that place. Feelings of belonging can be very intense when related to domestic places (e.g. the residential home), but place identification or attachment may also occur with other kinds of places, such as villages, regions, or landscapes. People tend to identify with places in which they can feel comfortable or at home, places they feel they belong to: "The meanings given to a place may be so strong that they become a central part of the identity of the people experiencing them..... Identity... refers to lived experiences and the subjective feelings associated with everyday consciousness, but it also suggests that such experiences and feeling are embedded in wider sets of social relations" (Rose, 1995: 88). Place identification may be intensified when contrasted with places that are different. This is often referred to as "identifying against" (Rose, 1995: 92). Moreover, attachment to the social environment, such as the community, neighbourhood, family and friends, may differ from attachment to the physical environment, such as landscape and nature (Hidalgo & Hernández, 2001; Lewicka, 2011). Research indicates that a strong social place attachment is significantly correlated to a longer length of residence, while attachment to the physical environment is not (Scannell & Gifford, 2010).

Because of increased levels of residential, daily, and digital mobility, the geographical scope of many people's lives has extended greatly over the past decades. This has resulted in a new mobilities paradigm in the

social sciences, that challenges the dominant sedentarist tradition which assumes strong ties and boundedness tying people statically to places (Cresswell, 2006; Sheller & Urry, 2006). In contrast, the new mobility paradigm regards migration and mobility as an ongoing process (Gustafson, 2006) and it perceives geographies of attachment and belonging as a form of 'stability-within-movement' (Sheller & Urry, 2006) instead of something completely opposite to movement (Halfacree & Rivera, 2012). This implies that when trying to understand processes of staying, especially how newcomers become stayers, processes of mobility need to be taken into account. In this context, Savage et al. (2005) developed the concept of elective belonging: "... the way that middle class people claimed moral rights over place through their capacity to move to, and put down roots in, a specific place which was not just functionally important to them but which also mattered symbolically" (Savage, 2010:116). Savage contrasts strategies or 'politics' of elective belonging with a more traditional type of belonging: nostalgia and dwelling. "Elective belonging pitches choice against history, as the migrant consumer rubs up against dwellers with historical attachments to place. In this encounter, numerous oppositions can be found: between mobile incomers and stable locals; between those exercising "choice" and those fixed in place; the agent and the object, all of these embedded in the mobilization of present against past" (Savage, 2010:116). Ingold (2000) does not make such a contrast claiming instead that we all dwell and that this can take many forms. However, for people who elect to belong the element of choice is key. Savage (2010) asserts that in elective belonging physical aspects of the place tend to be more important than social aspects, although there is also evidence that people who recently moved to the countryside can develop a strong attachment to the social aspects of village life and actively participate in the (rural) community (Gieling, Vermeij, & Haartsen, 2017; Gustafson, 2009). In addition, Watt (2009) observed a spatially selective form of elective belonging among middle class incomers in English suburbs. He refers to this as 'selective belonging', with middle-class residents creating boundaries around their neighbourhood in order to disconnect from areas and people that are perceived as less desirable. Benson and Jackson (2012) stress the importance of 'practice' in becoming attached to places (see definition of place attachment in the first part of this section). Focusing on performativity and on the 'doing' of place in their study, Benson and Jackson (2012) incorporate the s/elective belonging of middle-class residents to their neighbourhood. They found that middle-class residents adopt various practices that exemplify how middle-class people attempt selective place-making, not (only) spatially selective, but (also) selective in terms of the meaning or representations of their place of residence. Similarly, Cloke et al. (1998:134) refer to the concept of cultural competence as the way rural residents possess strong imaginations of what the rural is like "and that these imaginations will be associated with particular practices on social relations, life style and consumption".

In this paper, we use the concepts of s/elective belonging and of experiencing and 'doing' both the physical and the social aspects of rural places, in order to disentangle if and how rural newcomers become stayers and how they justify their 'stability-within-movement'. We recognize that staying involves the ability to stay, that is, possessing the resources and having the opportunity to do so (Kuhmonen, Kuhmonen, & Luoto, 2016). Based on the research of Bijker, Haartsen, and Strijker (2015) we expect that newcomers, in their search for a house in the

countryside, have been able to carefully weigh up different options regarding the physical rural environment. Most qualities of both the residential environment (house, garden) and the wider rural landscape (landscape characteristics, green, space, quiet) can be reasonably judged without really knowing a place by experience. Social aspects of the new residential environment are harder to judge at the time of searching for a house. Getting acquainted with the social aspects of village life comes only by living in the place and depends on the individual/family's intentions and strategies for getting involved in rural social life (or not). Accordingly we hypothesise that it is the physical aspects of the rural that bring newcomers to the area in the first place, but that long-term staying is more closely associated with the social environment. This hypothesis has also been informed by previous research into return-migration and the staying/leaving decisions of rural youths: social networks are widely acknowledged as playing an important role (Bjarnason & Thorlindsson, 2006; Haartsen & Thissen, 2014; Kloep, Hendry, Glendinning, Ingebrigtsen, & Espnes, 2003; Thissen, Droogeleever Fortuijn, Strijker, & Haartsen, 2010; Trell, van Hoven, & Huigen, 2012).

### 3 | METHODS

Twelve newcomer couples were interviewed. All had moved to the rural northern Netherlands 5 to 10 years prior to the interview. At the time of moving, all were in the family formation life course stage. Most of them had children aged 0-10 at the time of the move, some had children in early puberty, and some had no children (yet). The interviewees vary in being both short-distance and long distance movers, and also in coming from urban or rural areas. Some have already experienced living in the rural or even in the current region of residence, others had no rural linkages whatsoever. At least one of the partners of most couples commutes outside to a nearby town or city for work.

Respondents were recruited from a previous research project by Bijker et al. (2012, 2013) that took place in 2009 and 2010. Bijker's study included a survey of newcomers who had moved to the countryside during the period 2005-2009. Respondents, at that time, were also asked if they would be willing to participate in an interview at a later stage of the research. In 2015, we did follow-up interviews with newcomer couples in both the family formation and the retirement transition stage. These semi-structured (and digitally recorded) interviews, lasting 60-90 minutes, were intended to learn more about the newcomers' retrospective views on their decision-making process to move to the rural, their daily life experiences, feelings of attachment and belonging to the countryside, and if and how they perceived themselves to have become rural stayers. The interviews took a biographical perspective, acknowledging that (non)migration processes are rooted in multifaceted and multi-layered everyday lives, and that they are instigated by multiple reasons (see Halfacree & Rivera, 2012). In this paper, we focus on the twelve newcomer families that participated in the follow-up interview.

We combined deductive and inductive processes to develop a coding structure, building our categories partly on the interview questions and partly on the data. We used Atlas.ti to organise and code our data, but during the analysis phases we switched between the Atlas.ti codes and the original full transcripts to ensure that the richness of transcripts did not get lost.

## 4 | RESULTS

In this results section, we start by discussing whether our respondents feel they have become rural stayers, or not. After that we present the different ways our newcomers experience and 'do' the rural, and how they s/electively belong to the countryside, distinguishing between the physical and social environment.

### 4.1 | Convinced versus children-led staying

When they initially moved, our respondents had no definite expectations of staying in the rural. All reported that they moved with the intention of 'we'll see how it pans out, we might stay a year, five years or longer'. They were not, therefore, committed to staying from the outset. However, at the time of interview (5-10 years after the move had taken place), when respondents were asked whether or not they had plans to stay or leave the village or the rural in the (near) future, nine couples claimed to have become 'convinced stayers' and three couples could be classified as 'children-led stayers'.

The 'convinced stayers' expect to stay in the rural for as long as they can imagine. Most had moved to the countryside for lifestyle reasons, and possessed roots in the countryside and/or in the specific region they moved to. Gerrit and Petra live in the village where Gerrit had moved to aged 16, and that he left when getting married. After his divorce, he returned to his former parental home, and shortly after that he met Petra and she moved in. Gerrit: *"Well, I feel comfortable here, so uh... I will not leave"*. Petra confirms: *"We have everything we need in the vicinity, we have a large garden, we have everything we want, we can do whatever we want..... You know, if I feel at home in a certain place, then it is ok"*. Kees and Wilma originate from the West and South of the Netherlands. Kees spent his youth in a village. They both aspired outdoor living and moved to the rural North. Kees: *"If I try to imagine the future, well, I see a picture of us being here"*. Dennis and Karin did not have rural lifestyle preferences, but moved to the countryside to start a tourist business. They had to return to their former urban residential environment in the Western part of the country for a year, for business reasons. But they came back to their village. Dennis: *"I know now that I do not want to return to the city. And the children also want to stay"*.

Most 'convinced' couples expect that life course changes such as becoming elderly and (potentially) less mobile may result in a re-negotiation of their staying process. Some anticipate a residential move towards either a larger village or a town with more facilities and services. Peter and Ingrid moved to their rural village primarily for their daughter's health reasons. They would otherwise not have considered a move to the rural from their more urban home region in the western part of the Netherlands. Despite that, they now perceive themselves as 'convinced stayers'. Peter: *"I do think that when we are 75 and very grey, uh, we will live in a nice apartment in the town of Assen [a nearby rural town]. Things might be different at that time. If the children no longer live here anymore, and you are no longer able to go out riding the horse"*. Ingrid: *"Well, I am sure that I do not want to return to the West"*.

Sandra and Maarten moved from a town in a relatively rural province to their current village in Maarten's home region, because it was their dream to live in the countryside and Maarten felt like going

back 'home'. Sandra: *"We are not movers. ... I am not looking forward to getting old. Then I will have to leave because of old age. And I would like to stay as long as possible"*. Maarten: *"Well, we can always sacrifice part of the garage and make a downstairs bedroom there"*.

Richard and Bianca both have a residential history in the region where they now live. Bianca moved to the city of The Hague in the West of the Netherlands at age 11, while Richard moved between municipalities in the region. They feel very rooted in their village and region, because of both the vicinity of family and friends and the rural community life. Richard is a very convinced stayer: *"Well, then [when he gets old] I will still live here, yes. I don't think about potential health problems yet. And the graveyard is nearby! .... Life is good here."*

The three children-led stayer couples expect that child-related life course events will change their views on staying drastically. They expect to stay for the duration of the children's schooling to provide stability of education and maintain friendships. Two of the three couples moved to the countryside to offer the children a pleasant youth, the third moved for rural lifestyle reasons. All six respondents had some experience of village life during their own youth, although mostly in the more urbanised countryside in the West and South of the Netherlands. Linda and Robert are experiencing an empty nest life phase, and are debating between a residential move to be closer to their daughter (and the horses) - a few villages away - or to be nearer the town where Linda works. A move towards Linda's place of work would also enable the couple to find a place with a smaller garden, and have a range of facilities and services close by. At the time of interview, this couple were weighing up the pros and cons of almost every aspect of both their current and potential future home: needing one or two cars, living nearer to their daughter, having to miss their current very private garden, etcetera. The decision is far from settled: as Linda says: *"... and maybe, well, maybe we will still be here in ten years' time. ... if we were not able to find some place nicer. Because well, huh, it is no world away, a half hour to get to work, so uh ... so, in that sense it is doable. .... Yes, it is weighing the advantages and disadvantages.... If you then also have to pay a lot more for a house, well ..."*

For Marieke and Johan, both their present state of staying and their future leaving expectations are children-led. Marieke states that she would not be satisfied with her current residential environment if she had no children at home: *"No. I now find it quite nice to potter around in the garden. But if I had no children, I would, yes, prefer a more urban lifestyle."* Marieke recalls that Johan and she had an initial agreement to stay in the village for about ten years, and that they would then reconsider. At interview, they had lived in the village for six years and reported that the city does lure them with Johan feeling it is time for a change. Johan explained that they once considered buying and redecorating a farm house in this vicinity, but that these plans somehow were moved into the background. Instead, they consider that in nine years' time, when the youngest child will go to secondary school, that this might be an appropriate time to move back to an urban living environment. However, nothing as yet is certain: Marieke and Johan still have not ruled out the possibility that they will eventually end up in a different house in the same region.

The above makes clear that, although both convinced and children-led stayers see themselves as current stayers, both anticipate a future re-negotiation of staying or leaving. This re-negotiation will be

triggered by later life stage transitions. Among convinced stayers it is expected when the couple become elderly and less mobile. Among children-led stayers the transition to an empty-nest life phase (when the children leave home) is expected to act as the trigger. Both groups, therefore, are electing to belong in the rural for the time it suits their individual and family wishes. It also seems that because of these couples' earlier mobility histories, re-negotiating the decision to stay or move again is the logical thing to do. In the following sections, we explore how our respondents experience and participate in country living, and if and how they, deliberately or not, have developed selective senses of belonging, to either the physical or the social rural living environment. It will become clear that these experiences and senses of belonging will sometimes be different and distinctive between the children-led and convinced stayers, and sometimes similar and comparable.

## 4.2 | Physical environment

Both convinced and children-led stayers are unanimously enthusiastic about and satisfied with the physical aspects of the rural environment. They had made the deliberate choice to move to the countryside based on predefined goals (peace and quietness) and by exploring their new houses and residential environments beforehand. Most respondents report that these pre-conceived positive aspects of the physical environment have been confirmed. Robert (children-led stayer): *"It is so quiet here. If you sit in the garden in the evenings, the only thing you hear is the twittering birds. So, the residential environment is.. uh.. just really exactly, yes exactly as we expected it to be. And that the village had no facilities, well, we knew that and took that for granted"*. Judith (convinced stayer): *"There is much more peace here, space, friendliness, the pace of living is much slower"*. Ingrid and Peter (convinced stayers) explicitly state that they enjoy living near a nature area. They love to go into the forest with their dogs or by horse. Sandra and Maarten (convinced stayers) also mention the different wild animals, like snakes, deer, crickets, birds, and even a badger.

Our respondents not only identify with the rural landscape and their rural homes, they also make statements to identify against their former residential environment, to confirm/affirm their satisfaction with the rural residential environment. These often are anti-urban statements, related to high densities of people, cars, houses, and to crime, unsafe and dirty streets. By comparison, their new rural home regions are depicted as a rural idyll. Bianca (convinced stayer): *"That is the difference when you drive that way [towards former urban home region], you see these high rise concrete buildings, and here, it is just a beautiful landscape, cows, sheep, yes, and when I see that when I drive on the highway, especially when the sun shines over the meadows, I think, yes, I really am home"*. In some cases, the balance between rural and urban is viewed positively. Johan (children-led stayer): *"I find the combination of being able to live here and work in the city [of Groningen] great. This way, you have the best of both worlds"*.

The sense of belonging to the physical aspects of the rural living environment are amplified by a sense of ownership. Robert (children-led stayer): *"when I just walk in my garden, I do indeed think, yes, this really is ours. Yes, even after 10 years I still enjoy that feeling a lot"*. The process of identifying against others is also visible here. Linda positions



her sense of ownership and belonging against tourists (children-led stayer): *"When you drive around, in the region, and you see a road with trees alongside of it, yes, I think that is beautiful. And then you see these people with their caravan coming in, and then you think, ha-ha,... you come on holiday here, but I live here! Then I feel so privileged. We still think this is really special"*.

Most respondents are also very satisfied with their rural residential environment because they are happy that they can offer this rural idyll to their children. Erik (children-led stayer): *"The freedom they have, they can play around, when they are off school they can take the bike, uh, the oldest already goes to primary school by himself"*. Here, identifying against the city environment is also evident. Wilma (convinced stayer): *"If you see how many children in cities get the label of being 'hyperactive', then I think, well, kick them out, let them run around outside for a while and then they are totally different children. These children just cannot let off steam ... I am very happy that we can offer this to our children"*.

However, when asked for aspects of rural life they are least satisfied with, our respondents often mention the lack of alternatives/choice in the facilities and services that are available or accessible. They acknowledge that there is a basic level of facilities and services, but they express that they do miss diversity in the quality and supply of restaurants, going to the goods market on Saturday to buy fresh and more exotic products, or to have more alternatives in terms of primary or secondary schools for their children. Our respondents clearly feel that they can make a fair comparison, because they know the alternative, mostly urban, residential environment from their own personal experience of living there previously. Wilma (convinced stayer): *"You have to try hard to find coriander or Oriental products here... well, that's just different. But, on the other hand, we have food from our own vegetable garden, so you know, so it's ... Yeah, of course there are things that you, yes, miss, but it's more for nostalgic reasons that I occasionally think: Oh, I would now like to return again ... But a lot of different things replaced our urban life style. Rural living is just different. It's a different life. There we had the supermarket and the goods market around the corner, and here you do your shopping one, maybe two times a week and you throw everything in the freezer and, uh, you bake bread yourself and have your vegetable garden and ... it is just different, and that's cool"*. Wilma acknowledges that her wishes and demands changed when she had children. The life course stage of having young children automatically reduces the freedom to go out, to a restaurant, pub or cinema. Because having children ties people to the home, it is more easy to take for granted that the rural living environment provides one with less opportunities to go out. This life course related acceptance of having less options is mentioned by many more respondents.

Our respondents do not only accept having less options for themselves, but also for their children. Marieke (children-led stayer) commented on being able to go to film festivals and so on in her former city in the west of the Netherlands: *"Those events we don't have here. And you do have them there. You have the feeling that things do really happen there. It is more diverse. I still think it's a pity, but you can't have it all. Our children grow up in a very small uh ... uh ... limited and homogeneous world. And, yes, we used to live in a uh ... multicultural neighbourhood with two mosques around the corner ... I always enjoyed it, all these different people living next to each other. ... That's much more like the world really is, compared to our village"*. Marieke feels that the

people in the village are a bit conservative, but she knew that from her youth experiences in other villages, and she states that she takes it for granted because it is not that bad.

To summarize, we clearly found strong senses of elective belonging regarding the physical environment. Johan (children-led stayer) even explicitly explains how this works: *"Newcomers that decide to move here, have made their decision very purposefully. They come here for living reasons. They often are higher educated and have a more extended worldview."* This elective belonging is associated with processes of identifying against the former, often urban, residential environment, and against other groups, e.g. tourists.

The elective belonging also shows traces of selectiveness. Respondents clearly identify against aspects of rural living that they find less attractive, especially the lack of diversity and heterogeneity in facilities and services, and in people. But, most respondents claimed that the rural as a safe place for children to grow up in, and have a nice house and garden in an attractive natural setting, out-weighed the disadvantages of poor rural facilities and services. They also mention that given that they have access to transport, it is relatively easy to overcome the disadvantages by occasionally visiting a nearby town or city.

## 4.3 | Social aspects for rural life

### 4.3.1 | Elective strategies to integrate in social life

With regard to the social aspects of rural life, our respondents appreciate the socially inclusive, friendly and relaxed way of village life. They describe the village as easy going, where everyone can just be him/herself. Esther (convinced stayer): *"There is a live and let live mentality, you don't do difficult about something small"*. Also the social involvement is valued positively. Sandra (convinced stayer): *"The nice thing of living in a small village is that if you really do not know what you are actually doing, somebody else knows"*. Esther (convinced stayer): *"The social control feels as some sort of safety... If there has been a burglary or so, you can ask our elderly residents that always hang out in the village, they always know what has happened. That is an advantage. On the other hand, they also know what you will have for dinner if you walk home with your shopping bag, but, so be it"*.

Convinced stayers Sandra and Maarten and Dennis and Karin experienced firsthand the social and caring aspects of rural community life in cases of emergency. Sandra had broken her arm, and the whole neighbourhood organized a schedule of taking her to the physiotherapist while others took care of the kids. Maarten: *"If you give, you get things in return"*. Dennis had to spend a long time in hospital to be treated for a life threatening disease. Their neighbours helped Karin with their tourist business for several months.

Just as in the physical aspects of rural life, identification with rural social life also involved comparisons with the former (often urban) residential environment. Robert (children-led stayer): *"Here, people say hello to you. In [former place of residence] you first have to live there for ages. If you didn't belong to the group, well, it is hard to fit in ... Here, this is different"*. It is not only the individualistic way of life that they identify against: it also included the more stressed and hurried lifestyles and the more critical and complaining attitudes which respondents associated with urbanised areas.

Most respondents have become active in community life. Examples include organizing a music festival, being a member of the editorial board of the local village newspaper, co-organising the village festival, and helping at the village school. Especially for convinced stayers, getting active in community life forms part of a more or less deliberate strategy to become part of community life. Judith (convinced stayer): *"My grandparents also did that when they moved to a village a long time ago, they deliberately developed a strategy to integrate by joining all kind of clubs and associations. .... We did that as well. I joined the board of the neighbourhood association, and got involved in childcare and the nursery. This way you get social connections in the village. That is very important, because I noticed that if people don't do that, and keep that individualistic, haughty attitude of the West [urbanised area in the Netherlands]... uhhh... you don't make it here. And it is nice to have a social network here. Along the line at the football game, having a cosy chat, you get to know even more people. You talk, can I help you with this, shall I help you with that in return.... If you don't do that, you will end up socially isolated. That will not make you happy, I think."*

The above quote from Judith also hints at adapting attitudes towards what is perceived to be a prevailing attitude in rural village life. Several other respondents make statements about adapting their attitude in such a way that they expect to smooth their integration process and to become included in the community more easily. Petra (convinced stayer): *"In a village ... well, you get much more easily included in the community. OK, you have to have an open mind for it, but if you do, everybody welcomes you"*. And Esther (convinced stayer): *"I think we deliberately take a humble position. ... That is important for locals, you should not think you are something better than the locals"*. Also Dennis and Karin (convinced stayers) discussed in the interview how they purposefully adapted their attitudes. Karin: *"Don't be too smart"*. Dennis: *"Indeed, don't behave as if you know better"*. Karin: *"No, that is not appreciated. So we took a wait and see attitude... Modestly waiting what this would bring us. Yes, we discussed this beforehand. It was deliberate"*. Judith explains that she feels that attuning with the local attitudes is a responsibility of newcomers, to adapt to village life. *"You know, I am the one that moved to here, this was my choice, I stepped into their world. So I feel that I should adapt to them. And uh, I do my best for that. ... It is very important that you think about how you want to position yourself and how you open up to people, when you move to a village. ... You can only make a first impression once, and if you screw up, you have to work really hard to repair it"*.

Some convinced stayers not only deliberately invested time into the community life, but also actively sought out local businesses. If they needed a contractor/builder, or a painter for their house, they ask around to find a local tradesperson. Esther: *"Well, you have to help each other, that is the atmosphere, together we are strong. At our own small level we contribute to that"*. Dennis and Karin tried to purchase as much as possible the products they needed for their tourist accommodation business from within the village. They also opened their recreational room for local card playing evenings in the winter season. Dennis: *"That way, we keep communication lines short. And if the locals then have nuisance from one of our [tourist] groups, they don't immediately complain"*.

Almost all newcomers mentioned that it was relatively easy to become socially integrated into village life because they had children.

Ingrid (convinced stayer): *"Our children function as social catalysts ... they really help you to get into contact with people"*. This social integration via the children increases if the children attend the village school. Kees and Wilma (convinced stayers) noticed that they became involved in village life via their activities for the local school. This only started once the children reached the school-age of four. Before that, they were much more oriented towards their former place of residence in the West, while only having some social contact with the neighbours. The local school has played a key role in who they became acquainted with in the village. Miranda and Patrick (convinced stayers) are expecting their first child. They bought their house, with the intention of staying, in the village where Miranda grew up and where she still has her social network of family and friends. Miranda: *"I expect that when the child is born, we will get more active in the village and we will become members of the village association. .... We did consider becoming members when we moved here first, but we said, well, we will not go to their activities anyway, because they are only for children or for elderly people. So we put that on hold for later"*.

Children-led stayers seem to integrate into community life in a different way than convinced stayers. Their activities remain limited to child-related activities. Marieke (children-led stayer): *"I agree that you need to invest a little in order to add to social cohesion. And we did. I was an active parent in the nursery, and you were a member of the parents' association of the village school. But well, the activities need to be in the area of my interest. ... we participate in a lot of village activities that are... organised for the children"*. Linda and Robert also selectively became involved in activities that their children participated in, such as the basketball club or the local school. They did not get actively involved in community life otherwise.

Being an active member of the local community, or 'doing' the place, results in a sense of belonging and a feeling of being accepted in the community. For some convinced stayers, being invited to participate in community activities is interpreted as having been accepted as part of the community. Petra (convinced stayer): *"They now know where to find me ... a neighbour asks, can you please help me with this or that... well, that gives you a feeling of being accepted, being included.."*. Sandra agrees (convinced stayer): *"They know that we are always willing to help, so they ask you to participate in village activities. Then you feel part of the community. ... A few days ago, our neighbour was here, and she said: I saw such and such, you know her from the old days... And I said: hello, I have only lived here for 7 years! It feels like 30 years, and not only for me...."*. Bart also sees being asked to become a member of a local association as a sign of his acceptance: *"And when I talked to the people of the ice skating association... they hinted that they needed a new chairman, and if I would be inclined to become that chair. So... that says something about how established we are... I think it is noticed and appreciated that we show up everywhere"*.

### 4.3.2 | Selectively identifying against community life

Despite many respondents possessing a strong sense of being part of community life, there are some who feel that they will forever be perceived as newcomers. Esther (convinced stayer): *"Well, for the locals we will always be Westerners. But I don't feel stigmatized"*. Judith (convinced stayer) now feels that she is accepted as being a bit different: she

adapted her behaviour to what she perceived as acceptable local standards: *"In the beginning, we really felt newcomers.... If you wear a skirt on a weekday, well, they find that strange here, they think, oh, are you going out, at half nine in the morning when you bring the kids to school? They do not like fashion. I love fashion. ... So I started to dress more standardly, you know, jeans and a regular sweater. No pimping, they think that you show off if you do that. ... But now I have lived here longer, and the people know who I am, I dare to dress up a bit more. They now know it is part of me, that it is not meant as a statement, but just about who I am. And they think: ok, fine"*.

Ingrid and Peter (convinced stayers) claim that this difference between locals and newcomers is deep-seated and can be explained by the long-established local rootedness and networks possessed by locals but not possessed by newcomers. Ingrid: *"After a while, we became members of the horse riding club. And because we now know quite a few people there, it is cosy, but being totally included into the core group... no, that does not happen. And well, we do not really need that, but you will always remain an outsider,... yes, it will always stay that way. ... When you think about it, it makes sense, because these people here interact with each other from kindergarten until professional education, you can never catch up with that"*. Peter: *"It is the same with my former friends, they still adhere to each other"*. Ingrid: *"yes, but in a small village, people continue to see each other, even after their school trajectory. And then they find themselves waiting for their own children at the gate of their former primary school, and the new generation starts all over again. .... I think it may be different for our children, if they would stay, they would be included in this circle"*. Peter: *"Well, I must say that we do not have such a need. We are fine with being and continue to be imports"*. Karin and Dennis also refer to the difference between friendships they have in the village, and the more intense friendships they used to have in their former residential environment which could be traced back to their childhoods.

The s/elective sense of belonging on the one hand and remaining as a newcomer on the other is connected to newcomers establishing friendships with other newcomers more easily than with local residents (at least initially). Peter & Ingrid (convinced stayers): *"All our friends here are newcomers too. Birds of a feather flock together. We never tried very hard, we did not totally customize or transform ourselves in order to fit completely into the community. I think that can only make you feel unhappy. I did join the local school board, and Ingrid is a childminder, so we did get to know some people. And yes, at a certain stage people think, ok, if you are like that, we will accept you"*.

Judith (convinced stayer) also acknowledges that she feels more connected to other newcomers, despite her active strategy to become a member of the village community and a general feeling that she has been accepted. Judith: *"You notice that it is easier to click with people who also originate from outside the village, so to say. Who have different experiences. It is a different mentality.... People from the West are more ambitious, they feel they want to develop themselves, to achieve something. .... Villagers have a lesser urge for lifetime learning. They once chose a profession, and then do that for 40 years, well, they are fine with that. And that they stay at the same level, they are also fine with that. If I say to some of my old friends that I went back to study, they show a lot of interest. If I say this to people who originate from here, they look at me and you see them think: why on earth would you do that? Do you have*

*too much time on your hands? They look at my windows, and think: why don't you clean those instead?"*

Some respondents, especially children-led stayers, do not feel connected to local village habits and culture. They identify against rural culture by making statements that they are different. Robert (children-led stayer): *"well, the only place where you can participate in community life is in the community centre. But what they do there, bridge and uh klaverjassen [a Dutch card play] and folk dancing for people over fifty, I think well, these are not exactly the activities that I would like to do. And we also do not like Dutch language music ... if you know each other, it may be very cosy, but you know, if you have to do all kinds of things you actually don't want to do, well, you think: is it worth it? So at a certain moment I thought: I don't feel the need to get acquainted anymore. Especially if you no longer have children at the village school"*. Marieke and Johan also clearly feel different than the local villagers. Marieke: *"Most people in the village will go to the local snack bar if they 'go out for dinner'. We prefer to go to a city."* Johan: *"They also go to parties, in a park where you eat unlimited ice creams and French fries, you know, these kinds of things do not fit our norms and values"*. Johan continues: *"When we just moved in, we felt more or less obliged to participate in village festivities. ... But these activities were toe-curling! Crawling over a slippery tree trunk with below you a container of water... Awful!"*. Marieke adds another recent example: *"Our middle child wanted to join the local football club. And by its very nature, I have... uh... something against that, because I know how things go at such a football club. And now he finally is a member, things indeed go as I thought they would. Last week, they celebrated the end of the season. Also people who have nothing to do with football go there, it is a mini-village festival itself. And the norms, they are determined by a group of villagers. We said to our son: you have been ill, we do not want you to eat French fries there. And he came home and said: I did have fries, because the trainer said: that is how we do things here. I find it hard to deal with this kind of pressure from the village"*.

To summarize, we saw that our newcomers elect to become part of community life by becoming actively involved in all kinds of village activities. They develop a sense of belonging by actively performing in or by 'doing' rural community life. For some, this elective belonging is selective, in two ways. Firstly, children-led stayers mainly focus on child-related participation in village life. This selective integration can be interpreted as life course related s/elective belonging. Secondly, both children-led and convinced stayers selectively identify against some aspects of rural social culture. This selectivity does not seem to relate to their life course stage. It does confirm our hypothesis that one needs to actually live in the rural before getting a proper sense of the social aspects of rural life.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

In this paper, we explored whether or not rural newcomers consider themselves as having become stayers 5 to 10 years after their move to the countryside. We focussed on newcomers at the family formation life stage when they moved. Our analysis examined the newcomers' experiences of rural life and if and how they developed place attachment and a sense of belonging. Two staying types were



evident. Children-led stayers do not anticipate staying long-term, but instead expect that the transition to an empty-nest life stage will trigger a move back to their former urban residential environment. Convinced stayers, by contrast, expect to stay in the rural at least until the onset of old age (when a relocation to be nearer appropriate services may be necessary).

Newcomers to the north of the Netherlands identified with both the physical and social aspects of rural living. They appreciated its typically rural idyll-like characteristics such as peace and quiet, natural qualities, relaxed lifestyle, and friendly and inclusive community (c.f. Benson & O'Reilly, 2009; Haartsen, Groote, & Huigen, 2003; Halfacree, 1993, 1994; Smith & Phillips, 2001; Van Dam, Heins, & Elbersen, 2002). Disadvantages of the physical environment, such as the longer distances involved and the lack of diversity in facilities, were taken for granted because they did not outbalance the pros of staying (in the short or longer term). Processes of 'identifying with' the rural go hand-in-hand with 'identifying against' the former, often urban, residential environment. After visits to family or friends in the former home region, newcomers acknowledged and emphasised negative attributes of their former place of residence: a stressful and hectic city life, traffic jams and impolite people. By contrast, they referred to emotions of happiness and 'coming home' when crossing an imaginary border; that is, where the peaceful and quiet country life is perceived to begin. They now 'identify with' the rural place which has become meaningful to them. They elect to belong there.

The analysis, however, also found processes of selectivity in the way our newcomers developed deliberate strategies or cultural competences regarding rural community life. One strategy involved a conscious effort by the newcomers to adapt attitudes and the way they performed in order to get connected to, and accepted within, the local community. This seems to be a selective way of 'identifying with' rural community life, that is mainly found in the convinced stayers group. Two other forms of selectivity go hand in hand with processes of 'identifying against' some of the social aspects of rural living. First, children-led stayers seek only to become involved in (or 'identify with') child-related activities and only for as long as their children are active in village life. Second, both children-led and convinced stayers 'identify against' certain elements of local culture and of the real rural stayers: that is, the local residents who have lived all their lives in the rural community, possess an established social network comprised of family and friends, and who - because of these networks - really know the place. Newcomer stayers have, therefore, 'elected' to move to a rural environment (i.e. elective belonging to the rural) but also have 'selected' to belong to a sub-section of the rural community conducive to their life stage. One might go as far as to say that some newcomer stayers, especially children-led stayers, have failed to, or are unwilling to, develop anything other than a superficial sense of belonging: instead what has emerged is an 'elective residence': they have elected to reside in the rural (for now) but not elected to belong to the rural.

Our explorative paper has revealed more selectivity in the ways in which people elect to belong to places than previously thought. In addition to the spatial selectivity that Watt (2009) discussed, we found different types of social selectivity. It also has become clear that both elective and selective strategies of belonging go hand in hand with the process of becoming a stayer, either for the short

or for the longer term. Selectively belonging to a place keeps the 'escape' option of leaving open. The ability to move if one wishes - that is, to possess a perceived freedom to move should life circumstances require a move - supports the process of staying and may actually extend the period of time 'staying put'. This corresponds with the stability-within-movement and movement-within-stability conceptualisations of Sheller and Urry (2006). Because newcomers had previously moved, they may be more inclined to move again in the future. As such, staying as a process of negotiations and re-evaluations may be more frequently undertaken by newcomers than local rural residents. This may be because newcomers, such as those in this study, have a choice to stay whereas there are potentially less 'free' forms of staying where someone may want to leave but is unable to do so.

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